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Relief efforts rush aid to Central America

Outpouring of gifts overwhelms agencies

By Carol Ann Campbell
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Relief efforts to aid the Central American victims of Hurricane Mitch are in full swing as charitable groups combat hunger, disease, and homelessness left in the storm's wake.

They are accepting donations of just about everything and offer tips to donors on how to channel their generosity.

They ask that clothing be tightly packed and clearly marked. Cans of food should not be mixed in a package of school supplies. The hurricane victims need summer clothes, plus rice, beans, flour, dried milk, soup, batteries, medical supplies, tools, construction materials and, most of all, money.

A Morristown organization called PeaceWorks plans two shipments to Nicaragua. Another group in Morristown, the Emergency Aid Committee for the Honduran Province Gracias a Dios, is collecting items to help indigenous peoples and others in remote portions of Honduras. Larger organizations, meanwhile, say hundreds of people are calling to donate money.

"I came in this morning and there were 186 messages. That's the most the answering machine will hold," said John Thomas, a supervisor at a CARE organization call center. "We haven't had to contact anybody. They are contacting us." CARE accepts mostly financial contributions.

Many organizations refuse small offers of canned goods and clothes; the cost to ship the materials can exceed the cost of the items, and organizations often work out deals with wholesalers or pharmaceutical companies for low-cost food and medicines. But some organizations, such as PeaceWorks, which has ties to Nicaragua, are experienced in shipping goods.

"The response from people has been amazing. Everybody wants to help," said Jim Burchell, PeaceWorks director. "You have to have a professional organization at the other end. You can't just drop 10 boxes of clothes in a town with 100 families who need clothes."

In parts of Central America, landslides sparked by incessant rains destroyed entire towns, burying people alive. Government workers must burn the dead to prevent disease. Clean water is scarce in many areas of Nicaragua and Honduras, the countries most devastated by the hurricane. Also affected are El Salvador and Guatemala.

An estimated 11,000 people are dead, and thousands more are missing and feared dead.

Aid workers yesterday said the short-term crises will be followed by a decade-long effort to rebuild roads, bridges, schools and hospitals in the poor countries, some just emerging from devastating wars. Some experts say regional development has been set back 20 years.

Helicopters from the United States, Mexico and Great Britain are bringing food to people stranded on hilltops surrounded by floodwaters. Former Presidents George Bush and Jimmy Carter have visited hurricane-devastated areas.

In the United States, groups small and large are aiding the relief effort. UNISAL, an organization with ties to the University of El Salvador, is collecting items in Passaic and Fair Lawn. Marcal donated a ship container of paper goods, and UNISAL is attempting to find an organization to donate containers to help reduce shipping costs. It also needs volunteers to help load trucks.

"Everybody wants to help out. But helping out is not emptying your closets," said Reina Valenzuela, president of UNISAL. "We need much more."

Items needed include over-the-counter cough and headache pills, medications for diarrhea, fungicides, baby products, shovels, rakes and flashlights.

A Texas organization, Amigos Internacionales, is planning several large shipments, and any item sent to its Texas address will be delivered to Central America, where the organization has workers in several countries and ties with Christian organizations. The group is asking for blankets, children's clothes and dried foods.

"We ask if people send clothes, they send only clothes they would not be ashamed for themselves or their own children to wear," said Dr. Kenneth Dupuy, who runs the organization, which is also shipping water purifiers and medicines.

"I always hesitate to ask for money," he said. "But we can buy food and medicines sometimes for 5 or 10 cents on the dollar."

The following are collecting goods and contributions:

■ UNISAL will collect in Passaic and Fair Lawn. (973) 427-4650.

■ PeaceWorks will collect items starting at 10 a.m. at the United Presbyterian Church, 525 East Front Street, Plainfield, on Nov. 21 and Dec 5. There will be two other loading dates, Nov. 20 and Dec. 4, in Madison. (973) 765-9102.

■ Amigos Internacionales, Box 3369, Pearland, Texas, 77584-3369, (281) 412-2285.

■ The Emergency Aid Committee for the Honduran Province Gracias a Dios: 973-540-1370.

The following InterAction members are accepting contributions for assistance to victims of Hurricane Mitch. InterAction is a Washington-based association of aid agencies.

■ American Red Cross International Response Fund, P.O. Box 37243, Washington, D.C., 20013. Telephone: 1-800-HELP-NOW. Spanish: 1-800-257-7575.

■ Baptist World Aid, 6733 Curran St., McLean, Va., 22101-3804. Telephone: (703) 790-8980.

■ Brother's Brother Foundation/Nicaragua, 1501 Reedsdale St. Suite 3005, Pittsburgh, Pa., 15233-2341. Telephone: (412) 321-3160.

■ CARE, 151 Ellis St. NE, Atlanta, Ga., 30303-2426. Telephone: 1-800-422-7385.

■ Catholic Relief Services, P.O. Box 17090, Baltimore, Md., 21203-7090 Telephone: 1-800-235-2772.

■ Childreach, 155 Plan Way, Warwick, R.I., 02886-1099 Telephone: 1-800-556-7918.

■ Christian Children's Fund, 2821 Emerywood Parkway, P.O. Box 26484, Richmond, Va., 23261-6484 Telephone: 1-800-776-6767.

■ Church World Services, 28606 Phillips St., P.O. Box 968, Elkhart, Ind., 46515. Telephone: 1-800-297-1516, Ext. 222.

■ Doctors Without Borders, 6 East 39th St., New York, N.Y., 10016. Telephone: 1-888-312-0392.

■ Lutheran World Relief, Church Street Station, P.O. Box 6186, New York, 10277-1738. Telephone: 1-800-597-5972.

■ Map International, 2200 Glynco Parkway, P.O. Box 215000, Brunswick, Ga., 31521-5000. Telephone: 1-800-225-8550.

■ Mercy Corps International, 3030 SW First Ave., Portland, Ore., 97201. Telephone: (503) 796-6827.

■ Oxfam America, Central America Relief Fund, 26 West St., Boston, Mass., 02111. Telephone: 1-800-77OXFAM.

■ Partners of the Americas, 1424 K St. NW, Suite 700, Washington, D.C., 20005. Telephone: (202) 628-3300.

■ Salvation ArmyWorld Service Office, 615 Slaters Lane, Alexandria, Va., 22313. Telephone: (703) 684-5528.

■ Save the Children, Hurricane Mitch Emergency Appeal, P.O. Box 975-M, 54 Wilton Road, Westport, Conn., 06880. Telephone: 1-800-243-5075.

■ United Methodist Committee on Relief, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 330, New York, N.Y., 10115. (212) 870-3816.

■ World Relief, P.O. Box WRC Dept. 3, Wheaton, Ill., 60189. Telephone: 1-800-535-5433.

■ World Vision, P.O. Box 9716, Federal Way, Wash., 98063-9716. Telephone: 1-888-511-3640.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Rigoverto Hernandes of Bajos de Choloma in Honduras offers water to his dying cow. Several U.S. organizations are collecting supplies and money for the victims of Hurricane Mitch.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Residents of Posoltega, Nicaragua, gather for Mass. Prayers were offered for the more than 2,000 people who have died in the community.

"The response from people has been amazing. Everybody wants to help."
— JIM BURCHELL, PeaceWorks director

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